

Trump makes awkward Pearl Harbor joke on air in front of Japanese prime minister

"Who knows better about surprise than Japan?" the president said in a press conference on Thursday.

By **Wesley Stenzel** | March 19, 2026 5:14 p.m. ET

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Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi and President Donald Trump in Washington, D.C., on March 19, 2026. Credit: Alex Wong/Getty

Is it too soon to joke about Pearl Harbor? [President Trump](#) doesn't think so.

The commander-in-chief held a press conference in the Oval Office on Thursday alongside Japan's Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, which aired on NBC News, C-SPAN, and a number of other channels. The former *Apprentice* star fielded a question about why the United States didn't alert its allies about its first attacks on Iran.

"One thing, you don't wanna signal too much, you know?" Trump responded. "When we go in, we went in very hard. And we didn't tell anybody about it, because we wanted surprise."

The president then likened the unannounced attacks to one of the most infamous moments of World War II.

"Who knows better about surprise than Japan?" he joked. "Why didn't you tell me about Pearl Harbor, okay?"



President Donald Trump in Washington, D.C., on March 19, 2026. Credit: Aaron Schwartz/CNP/Bloomberg via Getty

He added, "You believe in surprise, I think much more so than us."

Trump went on to explain why he prioritizes the element of surprise.

"We had to surprise them, and we did," he said. "And because of that surprise, the first two days, we probably knocked out 50 percent of what we, and much more than we anticipated doing. So if I go and tell everybody about it, it's no longer a surprise, right?"

Representatives for the White House and the office of the Prime Minister of Japan did not immediately respond to *Entertainment Weekly's* request for comment.

CNN anchor Jake Tapper weighed in on Trump's comments on social media. "FWIW Prime Minister Takaichi was born 20 years after Pearl Harbor," he [wrote](#) on X. (Trump was born five years after Pearl Harbor.)

Political scientist and author Ian Bremmer also [shared his thoughts](#). "Did not have the pearl harbor reference while seated with the japanese prime minister on my bingo card," he wrote on X. "In retrospect i consider this a personal failing."

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The Japanese attack on the United States military base in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on Dec. 7, 1941, killed over 2,400 Americans and led to the U.S. declaring war on Japan.

[At least 1,940 people](#) have been killed in the ongoing war in and around Iran since American and Israeli forces attacked the country on Feb. 28, according to *The New York Times*.

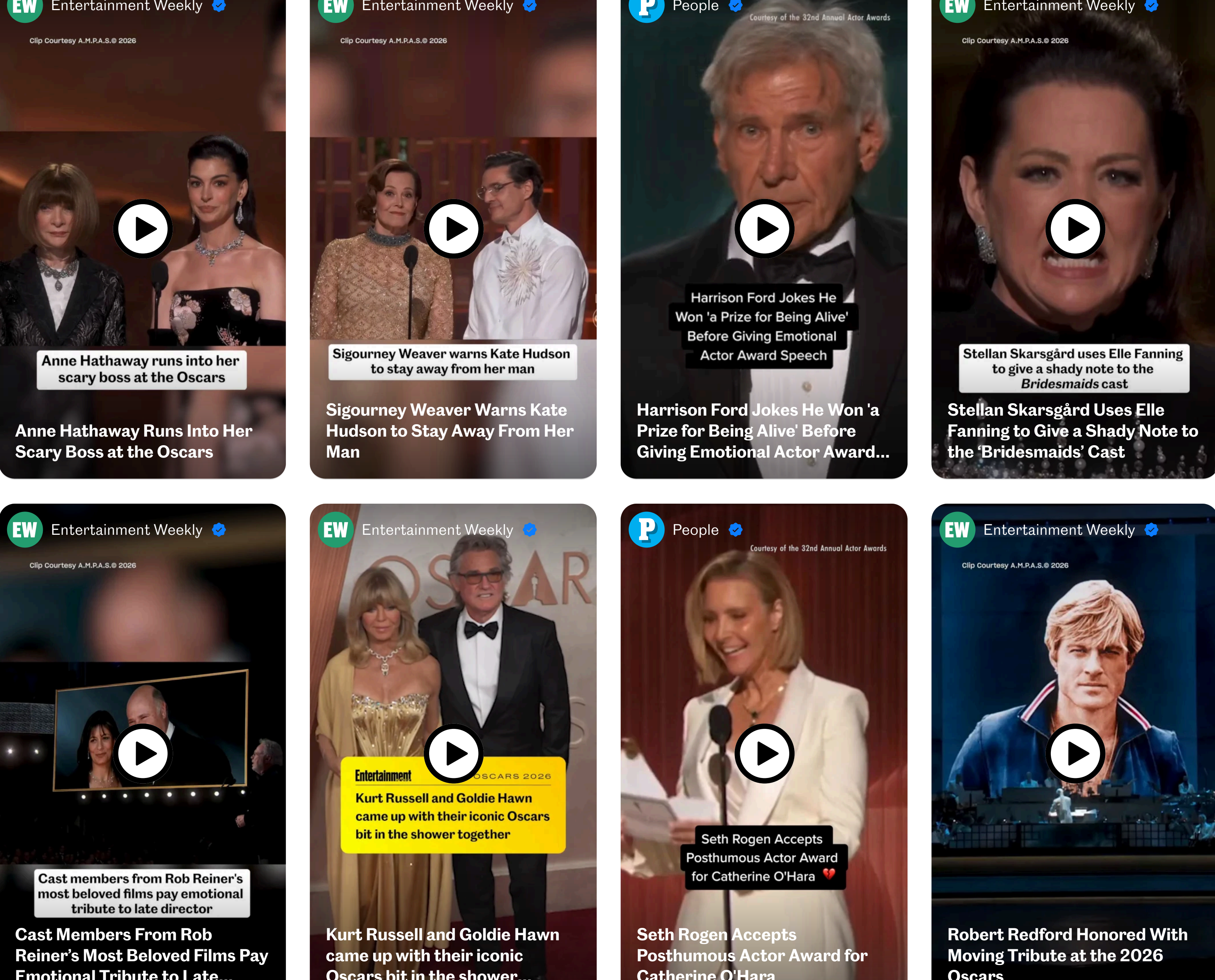
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